

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION 1064  
By Ramsey

A RESOLUTION to recognize and commend Sister Sandra  
Smithson for her innovative work in the  
education of children.

WHEREAS, the members of this General Assembly are pleased to specially recognize those outstanding individuals and citizens of Tennessee who have made it their calling to educate our children and to address the difficult and knotty issues relating to the education of underprivileged youngsters; and

WHEREAS, one such outstanding and committed Tennessean is Sister Sandra Smithson of the School Sisters of St. Francis, who, in August of 2003, opened a new charter school, Smithson-Craighead Academy in Nashville; the school is named for Sister Sandra and her oldest biological sister, Mary Craighead; and

WHEREAS, Sister Sandra grew up in Nashville and attended St. Vincent De Paul, the first private school for black children, where she was educated by the Sisters of the Sacred Sacrament; she went on to attend Xavier University in New Orleans, the only black Catholic college at the time, and then returned to Nashville to enroll in Fisk University's master's program for English literature; and

WHEREAS, finding the master's program unchallenging, Sister Sandra left to host a gospel music program and a political issues program, "A Woman Speaks" on radio station WSOK in Nashville; still feeling a call to a religious life, she soon left WSOK to join the School Sisters of Saint Francis; and

WHEREAS, Sister Sandra's first assignments were to fairly affluent schools in Chicago, but she left that environment for a radically different situation in Costa Rica, where in numerous small schools poor children sat in the floor with only a blackboard, paper and pencils and learned by rote memorization; when she became principal of an affluent Costa Rican school,

she brought in children from the barrios for an after-school program to teach them how to learn and to begin to eliminate the great social divide between rich and poor in that country; and

WHEREAS, Sister Sandra was then called back to the United States and was assigned to a high school in Milwaukee, where she found that after ten years away from the country, the majority of the students were now performing below grade level; she estimates a 70 percent failure rate among minorities and poor whites; and

WHEREAS, Sister Sandra returned to Tennessee when her mother fell ill and began to visit area schools, where she found the situation to be no better than in Milwaukee; she quickly recognized that failing students would either create a problem or drop out of school entirely, either in middle school or as soon thereafter as they could. Her idea for a special academy to address those issues began to take shape; and

WHEREAS, at age 77, Sister Sandra brings years of experience in teaching children of all socio-economic levels, but especially underprivileged children; in 1994, after much research, training, preparation and securing \$110,000 in donations, she was able to start her first summer of the Project Reflect Education Program (PREP) as an outreach program targeting the public housing community; and

WHEREAS, in the first summer at Moses McKissack school, concentrating on the basic skills of reading, writing and mathematics, with help from her sister, Mary Craighead, who had taught elementary school and had trained teachers at Vanderbilt's Peabody College, Sister Sandra was able to help children at the Preston Taylor public housing project to move up to their grade level that year; and

WHEREAS, developing an approach to underprivileged children designed to recognize the lack of language skills, social skills and self esteem in children with a deprived home environment, Sister Sandra and Mary Craighead have refined a formula to use in their new academy; Sister Sandra has said, "We have a teacher's manual that absolutely tells teachers the words to say, and we also have a behavior modification component in that book. It puts in place those pieces that normal children who come from affluence would have gotten at home."; and

WHEREAS, Sister Sandra's Smithson-Craighead Academy will employ non-graded assessments to allow each child to move at his or her own developmental pace, avoiding sending children to the next step until the current step is mastered; students will be monitored daily so that teachers can better understand where the students are in an educational sense and how they must modify their behavior so that they can learn and have control over their own future; and

WHEREAS, Smithson-Craighead Academy will provide the parents of poor families an option other than a traditional school that will allow their children to learn in a tailored program that is affordable; and

WHEREAS, it is appropriate that this General Assembly pause in its deliberations to specially honor and commend the author of this visionary concept to meet the educational needs of those of our citizens who are most at risk of being denied the realization of hope and aspiration for a better life; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE OF THE ONE HUNDRED THIRD GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES CONCURRING, that we commend Sister Sandra Smithson for her dedication to the education of the children of our state, especially the disadvantaged, commend her for her visionary approach to meeting their educational needs in a way that gives each child a chance to succeed, and thank her for her years of commitment to the education of children everywhere, regardless of their race, ethnicity or social and economic status.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that we offer her our best wishes for the success of Smithson-Craighead Academy, and for much success and satisfaction in all her future endeavors.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation with this final clause omitted from such copy.